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ABSTRACT

The writing of five first grade children was studied to determine whether findings of a previous study regarding children's concept of story structure would be demonstrated in the children's original compositions. The weekly sessions during the study included individual or group prewriting discussions, drawing and active writing, modeling by the investigator, and researcher/student conferences. Folders containing writing products and ideas for future writing were kept for each child. Interviews were tape-recorded, and a log of observations was kept by the researcher. Of the 18 writing products produced by the five children, nine were in narrative form. Analysis of these revealed the following behaviors: (1) use of formal openings and closings, (2) use of simple story grammars, (3) use of past tense, (4) controlled use of fantasy, (5) awareness of voice and audience, and (6) use of dialogue and conventional characters, but little use of action. The five interviews suggested a conscious effort on the part of the children to develop a beginning event from personal experiences or from television and movie themes. Comments indicated that they recognized the need for conclusions and that it is sometimes better to bring a story quickly to an end. The children's growing control of ideas about their own compositions suggests that metacognitive knowledge of story structure emerges early. (HTH)

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WHAT DO CHILDREN UNDERSTAND ABOUT THEIR OWN COMPOSITIONS?

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of the
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In an effort to gain a better understanding of children's mastery of story rhetoric, I began this study with five first graders from Pemberton Elementary School in Henrico County, Virginia. I wanted to determine whether or not the findings of Applebee (1978) regarding the child's concept of story were demonstrated in the original compositions of these children. More significantly, I hoped to discover that the children could indicate to me their knowledge of story structure as they discussed their compositions with me. Goodman and Goodman (1983) observed that children use in writing what they observe in reading, but it is only when they try to write that the observation focuses on how form serves function. By observing the young child's control of structure in his/her own story creations, I hoped to find clues to the development of certain metacognitive abilities -- knowledge of one's own literary abilities and knowledge of the forms that stories take.

Applebee (1978) noted that young children demonstrate knowledge of the formal characteristics of story in the telling or retelling by using the following features: (1) formal opening and closing phrases, (2) change in voice pitch and tone when telling a story, (3) acceptance of fantasy, (4) use of conventional characters and types of situations, and (5) consistent use of past tense. He concluded that the young child's growth in knowledge of story structure is shown in the complexity of the experiences dealt with, the mastery of the techniques and conventions of literary form, and the ability to deal with separation of reality and fantasy. Story production for children beginning at age five involves materials organized around a problem or theme and having an identifiable beginning and end. Separation of fact and fiction ultimately permits the generation of stories outside personal experience.

Calkins (1983) also observed that concern for truth (or reality) predominates until the child gives more attention to audience and text form. Siegel (1983) noted that during beginning independent writing, the child does not use form rigidly, but focuses effort on coherence and building structure and sequence.

Mastery of story structure in young writers was described by Calkins (1983) in terms of overlapping and interconnected characteristics: (1) correspondence between products and concepts in both good and bad writing efforts; (2) total growth in concept repertoire with numbers of concepts used relating to the writing context; (3) concept sophistication as illustrated by employing action as a tool, showing concern for audience and text, and using poetic license; and (4) ability to explore various treatments of a topic -- the "start of thematic unity."

These documentations of the child's developing awareness of narrative form served as the basic format for my study of the five young writers. I wanted to match my observations of story concept in writing contexts with the findings of some of these new classic studies of children's oracy and literacy.

THE SUBJECTS

Ben, Beth, Alicyn, Shona, and Annie were selected by their teacher to work with me every Tuesday morning during reading and "work jobs" time (8:00 a.m. to 9:00 a.m.). The children ranged in ability from average to superior. They were chosen to participate for a variety of reasons. Beth, Alicyn, and Shona were independent learners who needed an enriched curriculum. Annie was in remission from leukemia. Ben was a repeating first grader who was recovering from the divorce of his parents. These two children needed the special attention my weekly session could provide. I should mention that all the children in this class are exposed to daily independent writing as a part of their "work jobs"; therefore, writing is not a new experience. This writing routine usually requires them to write a story from an incomplete sentence stimulus. (Example: I sometimes worry when I _____.)

THE METHOD

Beginning in January, 1985, I met with the children on Tuesdays during the designated period. We met in a corner of the classroom or in the speech teacher's room depending on the needs of the rest of the class. Following Graves (1983) format, the sessions usually included individual or group prewriting discussions, drawing and active writing, modeling by the investigator, and subsequent conferencing.

During active writing, I tried to be unobtrusive, to answer questions quickly and to encourage the children to continue their efforts. The children generated their own writing topics. When a child's composition was sufficiently developed, I would conduct a more formal conference which included the child's oral reading followed by an interview. The interview guide was developed to standardize my attempts to explore the children's understanding of story rhetoric. The guide, developed from the basic story grammar format described by Mandler and Johnson (1977), contained questions relating to beginning story elements, character development, plot or problem, and ending elements. I also included questions relating to sense of voice and audience. As the interview progressed, I often included questions which were generated in response to a child's introduction of a new phenomenon; for example, Ben's sudden inclusion of fantasy in his typically reality-based narrative.

Folders which contained writing products and ideas for future writing were kept for each child. Interviews were recorded on tape for later analysis. I also kept a log of my observations of each session. All three sources of information were used in analyzing the knowledge of story structure demonstrated by the five writers.

OBSERVATIONS

Analysis of Writing Products:

During the three months of weekly sessions, eighteen writing products were produced by the five children. Of the eighteen, nine were in narrative form. Five

of these stories involved family members or pets as main characters. Three were true stories of events which happened at home. One child wrote two works which she identified as poems.

An analysis of the nine narratives revealed the following behaviors:

1. Formal Openers and Closings. Five children used formal openings for their stories. One day was a favorite opening. Only one child chose to title his work. A similar frequency of formal closings was evident. The children enjoyed using such expressions as, "That's that!" or "Good by!" for emphasis. Annie added finality to her closing sentences through voice tone and expression.
2. Story Grammar. Five of the nine stories could be classified as following simple story grammar format. Ben, the most reluctant writer, had the most well-developed episodes. Beth concentrated almost exclusively on setting and beginning elements. Her stories rarely involved problem solution or goal attainment.
3. Use of Past Tense. Five of the stories were written consistently in past tense. In another instance, Beth changed to past tense as she switched from transactional to narrative form within her one piece of writing.
4. Reality vs. Fantasy. Five of the stories showed clear control of fantasy. In one story, Ben began a true story and ended with a fantasy. He explained, "The ending part is make-believe, but it (the action) is something she (his cat) could do."
5. Voice and Audience. Three children wrote rather fluent stories in first person. Five of the writers showed a primitive sense of audience by talking to the reader or asking questions within the story. Annie's work illustrates both: "Annie - Jimmy has a new friend. Her name is Kaity. Do you like hre name? if you dow say it to your self!" Other devices to engage the reader included emphatic statements ("I mean it! I do!") or exclamations ("Oh! Stars.").

6. Other Devices. The use of conventional characters was limited in the nine samples. Those which occurred usually took the form of personified animals and toys. Action was not as yet used discriminately by the children. Dialogue was employed by four children.

Observations from Interviews and Anecdotes:

I tried to gather information through interviews and recorded observations which would suggest the degree to which these children had internalized story rhetoric. The five complete interviews suggested a conscious effort on the part of the children to develop a beginning event from real-life experiences or from television and movie themes. Beth was able to indicate the parts of her jungle story which constituted the beginning elements:

"I mention lots of animals, alligators and a big lake setting.

I decided I wanted to write about me riding the elephant."

Characters were chosen because of familiarity with people, pets, and situations. Siblings were favorite heroes and villains. Only Annie gave any indication of the need to develop her characters, the mice. ("I had to make them careful about the cat.")

All five of the children interviewed were able to identify the plot (most exciting part) of the story. Beth was able to explain her decision for plot development, but indicated, "I didn't plan it this way. It just happened."

I was surprised at the extent of the children's grasp of ending elements. Their comments indicated that they recognized the need for conclusion and that it is sometimes better to bring a story quickly to an end. Shona and Annie used additional "good by" closings for humor.

The five children have developed some flexibility in use of voice. Several wrote comfortably in both first and third person. They wrote at varying distances from the reader. The audiences most frequently mentioned for their work were parents, schoolmates, and teachers. Annie indicated that anybody would enjoy her stories. Beth's statement summarized the self-assured attitude of the children toward audience acceptance when she declared, "My mom would like to read it (story). She thinks what I write is valuable. Whoever is reading it will like it."

I found these children to be confident writers with an emerging sense of story structure. They can identify the elements suggestive of a simple story grammar. They write narratives in past tense consistently. Those who enjoy writing in narrative form have a more fully-developed sense of fantasy. Personality more than intelligence appeared to govern this phenomenon for the five children in this study. Character development is, perhaps, the least well-developed writing concept. First graders probably lack the maturity and experience to be able to deal with such complexity in their writing. The children's growing control of ideas about their own compositions suggests metacognitive knowledge of story structure emerges early.

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INTERVIEW FORMAT

1. (OVERVIEW) TELL ME ABOUT YOUR STORY.
2. WHAT MADE YOU (WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO) WRITE ABOUT-----?
3. (BEGINNING ELEMENT) WHAT DID YOU THINK OF AS YOU BEGAN TO WRITE YOUR STORY?
4. (FORMAL OPENING) WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO START YOUR STORY WITH----?
5. (CHARACTERS) WHY DID YOU PUT _____ IN YOUR STORY?
6. (VOICE) ARE YOU IN THE STORY?
7. (CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT) READ ME THE PART THAT BEST DESCRIBES-----.
WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO WRITE THAT?
8. (PLOT/PROBLEM) WHAT DO YOU LIKE BEST ABOUT YOUR STORY?
OR
READ ME THE MOST EXCITING PART OF YOUR STORY.
WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO WRITE ABOUT THAT?
9. (ENDING) READ ME THE END OF YOUR STORY.
OR
WHY DID YOU END THE STORY THE WAY YOU DID?
10. (AUDIENCE) WHO WOULD LIKE TO READ YOUR STORY?